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# Dalit Cultural Movement & Dalit Politics in Maharashtra

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# **Dalit Cultural Movement & Dalit Politics in Maharashtra**

**Gopal Guru**



**VAK Publication**

Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK) established in 1981, is a secular Voluntary Organisation engaged in the study & research of contemporary social issues. Geographically, VAK's activities are oriented towards Western India, viz., Maharashtra, Gujarat & Goa.

## **Dalit Cultural Movement & Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra**

**Gopal Guru**

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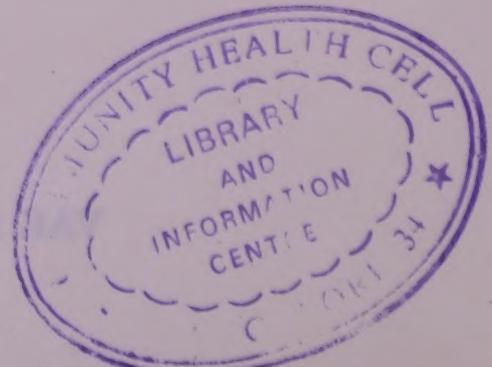
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## Preface

**T**he Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra performed two historical functions. One, it created its own poetry, folksongs and musical instrument in order to satisfy the cultural needs and aspirations of the Dalit masses. Two, it created a radical context for the emancipatory politics led by Dr. Ambedkar and later on by several committed Dalit leaders.

Unfortunately, during the last one and half decade, the Dalit cultural movement has dissolved itself into insignificance. This decline of Dalit cultural movement is contingent upon the over all decline of Dalit political movement in the State. The decline of Dalit political movement together with Dalit culture movements can be accounted by the cooptation of motivated Dalit political and cultural activists by several pacification structures including the state. The net result of this cooptation was that it diverted these otherwise true agents of history from transformative politics to the politics of manipulation and creating illusions. However, the logic of dialectics of Dalit cultural movements seems to be creating an alternative cultural subjectivity in the form of Dalit women's cultural assertion which promises to redefine the agenda of Dalit cultural discourse. The present study is a modest attempt to understand the complex relationship between the Dalit cultural movement and Dalit politics in Maharashtra.

I thank Vikas Adhyayan Kendra for giving financial support and Prof. Ram Bapat, Prof. K. N. Panikkar, Mr. Ajit Muricken, Dr. Willy D'Silva and Sandeep Pendse for their critical inputs that shaped this work.

**Gopal Guru**  
November, 1997



# Dalit Cultural Movement

&

## Dalit Politics in Maharashtra

The political dimension of the cultural contradiction in India in general and Maharashtra in particular has always occupied an important position both in the academic debates and also in the Dalit-Bahujan politics.<sup>1</sup> In the second half of the last century and in the beginning of this century, this cultural contradiction was, however, articulated primarily in the dichotomy between the Brahminical and non-Brahmin culture in Maharashtra. It has also been argued by the protagonist of non-Brahmin cultural tradition that their cultural initiative was misappropriated by the upper castes,<sup>2</sup> and their authentic culture purposefully rundown by these upper castes.<sup>3</sup> Some of them argue even now that their culture aspirations were not recognised by the Brahminical social Order.<sup>4</sup> It is, of course, quite true that the Maharashtrian upper caste society did not accord due recognition to the cultural tradition of the Dalit in Maharashtra.

In fact, on certain occasion it was really rundown by these upper castes in the state. On this background, the re-emergence of Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra is a welcome development in as much as it acquired for itself a distinct space in the cultural life of the state. Literature has been the most important component of Dalit culture in Maharashtra.

Other factors aptly justify the emergence of Dalit literacy movement in Maharashtra. For example, this movement helped Dalits to carve out for themselves a culturally vibrant identity. It has also helped the Dalits to create and conserve critical

energies against dominant forces whose aim is to marginalise and humiliate the Dalits. These are some of the strong points of this cultural assertion..

Today, however, the Dalit cultural movement and more particularly its literary component exhibits regression in the cultural landscape that once provided a radical context to the emancipatory politics of Dalits in Maharashtra. It proved to be weak in the face of the threat of Hindutva with its efforts to homogenise, assimilate and subjugate Dalit culture.

The Dalit cultural movement is also in the grip of literary stagnation that grips the Dalits. Further the state co-opts the Dalit cultural movement and attempts to tame it – in effect depriving the Dalit of the emancipatory potential of the cultural movement. There is an obvious split in the cultural sphere in Maharashtra. The sphere is divided into the culture of the great tradition and that of the little tradition.

To understand Dalit culture in Maharashtra and its political potential it is necessary to delineate the relationship between culture and the political movement led by Ambedkar and various Dalit leaders after Ambedkar.

The study of interface between Ambedkar and Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra is warranted due to the more serious development in the realm of Dalit culture. This serious development is related to the fact that Dalit culture as of today has been mainly defined and understood only in terms of the Dalit literary movement.<sup>5</sup> It is also seen as necessary development to create a counter-culture to the Brahminical exploitative culture. This attempt to privilege the Dalit literary movement as the dominant mode of cultural expression ultimately resulted in the eclipse of other modes of Dalit cultural assertion. For example, Dalit popular or subaltern cultural tradition has become academically and also politically almost invisible from mainstream politics and also the dominant Dalit cultural discourse. This cultural scenario, therefore, raises, the following important issues regarding Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra.

First, what has been the historical and theoretical occasion for the arrival of the Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra in general and Akola Varahad region in particular? This question would involve an understanding of the historical development of the cultural assertion of the Dalit movement. Besides, it will also dwell upon the material context and ideological underpinnings of the Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra.

Second, it would be interesting to find out as to what was the theoretical context in which the Dalit cultural movement underwent changes both in its form and content. This, therefore, makes it necessary to find out whether the Dalit cultural movement represents any continuity or suspension both in terms of its forms and also the content.

Third, what has been the social base of both in terms of gender and caste of this Dalit cultural assertion? And from where did it derive its critical input?

Fourth, as corollary to the third, the question needs to be asked is, does the Dalit cultural movement represent one homogeneous cultural expression? If not, what are the different cultural expressions within the Dalit context and how do they relate to each other? Do these expressions overlap or are they different and in certain sense mutually exclusive both in term of forms and politics? This question becomes important because some leading scholars with a few exception<sup>5</sup>, have avoided the question of how does one understand Dalit cultural orientation which now seems to be representing cultural hierarchies within the Dalit community? In other words, how does one understand and comprehend the mainstream Dalit cultural mode which seeks to reproduce the same cultural hierarchies of its adversaries against which it fought at the first instance? It would be, therefore, necessary to find out as to what extent the Dalit cultural movement could be effective in the fight against the cultural hierarchies that often served as Brahminical arrangement for legitimizing the social difference and new modes of social control?

Fifth, as a part of the critical assessment of the Dalit cultural movement, it is necessary to locate the factors that can possibly explain the regressive nature of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. This would involve the role of state and other agencies that try to gobble up the creative and revolutionary cultural categories that authentically belong to Dalit.

Finally, what are the radical cultural alternatives that have come up and sustained in the context of cultural regression of Dalit cultural movement. In other words, we will discuss the role of subaltern cultural alternative in radicalising Dalit masses and also in enriching Dalit cultural movement both in form and content.

Before we begin discussion of these issues, a methodological clarification is in order. I am aware that my critical examination of Dalit cultural movement in Maharashtra and its response to Ambedkar's ideology and Dalit politics would require certain amount of empirical evidence. In order to provide this evidence, I have chosen Akola District as the major sample, while I have also taken Amravati and Buldhana and parts of Marathwada in order to support my main argument. I shall also draw upon the support from other regions of Maharashtra but only at the specific level.

My choice of these this District is not arbitrary, on the contrary, it is influenced by three major factors. First, this district consists of the Mahar-Buddhist population which is not only socially homogeneous but is numerically the largest among all the district of Maharashtra.<sup>6</sup> Second, it is this district which experienced the early emergence of cultural assertion both in terms of literature and also folk theatre. And this cultural expression seems to have created and sustained the radical politics of the Dalit masses both against the capitalist and Brahminical exploitation and against its political expression that emerged in the form of Congress Party. Thus, this District represents the perfect symbiotic relationship between the culture and Dalit politics. Third, this district also experienced the early response to Buddhist conversion movement in the state. And finally, the cultural movement in this district seems to have received its

critical cultural input both from the local Bhakti traditions and also the Dalit cultural tradition existing away from this district. However, Dalit cultural expression of this district seems to have maintained its incisive edge while borrowing from the different cultural traditions from the same emancipatory cultural setting.

Dalit cultural movement can be very broadly defined in terms of its different components like literature both oral and written, different popular musical traditions among Dalits, and various forms of theatre activities. It has been argued that Dalits of Maharashtra have created a rich historical tradition of cultural tradition of their own. This claim of cultural authenticity is adequately evident from the following popular Marathi proverb:-

*In the Brahmin House – Writing*  
*In the Kunbi House – Grain*  
*In the Mahar House – Singing<sup>8</sup>*

The above proverb shows that the Mahars and the Mangs have their own authentic tradition of singing and popular music. The Mahars of Maharashtra seems to have created their own musical instruments and different cultural forms that were just appropriate to the cultural aspirations and other requirements. Thus, we have among the Dalits cultural landscape the musical tradition of Tamasha (a performing art combining music, singing, dance and theatrical enactment), which was related to Mahars of Maharashtra, while Layite, Nappak, Powada, Khanjiri Bhanjan, Duf and Ektari Bhajan were the specific musical forms that were prevalent among the Mahars of this district. However, like the Mangs, the Mahars did not have enough skill and expertise in making musical instruments themselves though they could make the minor instruments like *Chondka* (Single strings instrument) and *Khanjiri* (Sort of a small *Duf* usually made from the skin of the monitor lizard ) themselves. However, the lack of these instruments did not create much problem for the Mahars because in the absence of these instruments Mahars seem to have handled the narrative forms (story telling) in order to satisfy the cultural needs of Dalits of this part of Maharashtra. It is for this reason in the pre-Ambedkar period the Mahabharat story was so popular among the Mahars of Akola District.<sup>9</sup>

In comparison to Mahars, the Mangs of this district had also the skill and tradition of making musical instruments and of playing those instruments like the Pariahs of Tamilnadu.<sup>10</sup> But we do not have a strong tradition of singing among Mangs of this district. On the other hand, the tradition playing musical instruments and singing is strong among the Mahars and also very specific to Mahar culture. Some writers have argued that the musical instruments at least among the different Dalit castes are caste specific.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the pre-Ambedkar period, the Mahars from this District would handle only the instruments like Dhol, *Dholki*, *Duf*, *Khanjiri* and *Ektara* (these are various percussion instruments made with leather as also some simple string instruments) while the Mangs would handle only the *Dafle*, and *Halgi* in this region. This particular musical tradition among Mangs and even Mahars was tailored to the cultural needs of the society of the “*Twice Born*” from the village. This cultural subordination of Mangs was very much prevalent in this district as also elsewhere in Maharashtra.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in this context, the description of Mangs in the Gazetteers as *the musicians of the villages* is apt.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to suggest that the musical tradition of the Mahars of this and other districts was not subordinated to the cultural needs of the *Twice Born*. It is true that the Mahars were not only singing, dancing and playing music for their own entertainment but also for the entertainment of their feudal lords. However, as our study of Akola district shows the Mahars from this district contested the feudal exploitation and domination through their cultural creativity and sensibility. Dalit (Mahar) cultural protest during the pre-Ambedkar period is clear in the following song composed by the Dalits of so many villages from the Akola District.

“*The Chambhar takes away the dead cow of the village Patil.  
He makes a leather bucket out of it.*

*You savarnas drink water from that leather bucket,  
then you, O the lords of Mahars why do you feel the touch of  
Mahars polluting.”<sup>14</sup>*

In this particular popular song, Dalit protest seems to be mild but definite against the social discrimination and exploitation by the Feudal castes who according to the song practice double standard in the sense that the *Twice Born* did not find the leather polluting but they find the touch of Mahar polluting. It is interesting to note that the *Twice Born* would also find the touch of the *Chambars* polluting despite the fact that the later has crafted the leather bucket. In this regard it is also important to keep in mind that the social site of this cultural activity could not be the open space in the village but the *Maharwada* (the space outside the village reserved for Mahar residences). Secondly, the cultural protest of the Mahars was bound to be couched in mild terms for the obvious reasons that the Mahars were tied to the structure of *Jajmani* system and thus were likely to be crushed under the patronage of their lords. In fact, as we are told by some of the oldest Dalits, the Mahars from this region were paid with only the rotten left-over food, a piece of cloth, and a coconut for their cultural or musical performance by the upper caste patron<sup>14</sup>. Dalits of this district, unlike Dalits of Thane District in Maharashtra<sup>15</sup> could not refuse to perform.

However, feudal exploitation of the Dalits did not go uncontested; on the contrary it found a militant cultural expression in the oral tradition of *Powada* (ballad) that was so popular among the Mahars of Akola and Amravati districts. Dalits composed and sung the *Powada* in order to valorise the exemplary courage that one Dalit woman showed in killing a Landlord who considered it to be his feudal right to enjoy the first night with the Dalit bride.<sup>16</sup> This act of Shalini, a Dalit woman who killed a Landlord from the Bhokari village from Amravati district captured the literary imagination of *Mahar Shahirs* (balladeers) from these Districts. The valorisation of Shalini became the major part of the *Shahiri* of Kisan Wankhade from Adgaon village of Akot Taluka of Akola district. This popular tradition of *Shahiri* built up around the legend of Shalini occupied the cognitive map of Dalits across the districts. Similarly, *Shahir* Gulab Tayade from Kaulkhed village of Akola district and another *Shahir* Bhivsan Gawande from Daryapur in Amravati District sensitised Dalits of these district through their *Shahiri* about the sexual

exploitation of Dalit women by a high caste *Zamindar* (feudal land lord) from Sanglud Village of Daryapur Taluka of Amravati District and valorised through their *Shahiri* the exemplary courage that Dalit Sampat Gawande showed in beheading this *Zamindar*.<sup>17</sup>

In the pre-Ambedkar period, the cultural activist from this district derived critical input primarily from the Bhakti tradition represented by both Kabir and the Warkari sect and to some extent the Mahanubhav tradition. For example, the Mahars of this district used to recite the *Dohe* of Kabir in their ever day cultural life. This linkages between the Dalit cultural tradition and Kabir is evident from the following Doha that the Mahars of Lohari Khurd used to recite in the Dalit locality.

*“Jis Tan Lage vahi tan jane Duja kya Jane”<sup>18</sup>*

This particular Doha reflects the a sort of epistemology in the sense that only those who actually suffer can develop the consciousness of suffering. Similarly, Mahars of this region also integrated into their cultural consciousness and activism the form of *Abhang* and its content from the Warkari tradition led by Tukaram. This impact of Tukaram on Dalits of this region is evident from the following *Abhang* that the Dalit seems to have used in their cultural activity. (*Abhang*, *Doha*, and *Ovi* are all forms of devotional poetry associated with the Bhakti tradition. They are often rich with social commentary.)

*“Nindakache Ghar Asave Shejari Nirmal Jahali*  
*Dehachi Pasali”.*<sup>19</sup>

This particular *Abhang* suggest that the tradition of tolerance among Dalits. Thus, in this phase Dalit are deriving their critical input from the emancipatory traditions that fought against the Brahminical domination.

## **Interface between Ambedkar and Dalit Cultural Movement**

At this moment it is important to understand did the cultural activism of Dalits remain fettered to the cultural needs of the feudal lords or did it make attempts to move progressively away

from mere feudal entertainment and little bit of dissent to the more radical levels of revolutionary ideology and the emancipatory Dalit politics? If yes, what has been the interface between this cultural assertion and Ambedkar's ideology and politics? Secondly, from where did Dalits of this district derive their critical input and did the Bhakti tradition continue to influence the cultural sensitivity of Dalits during Ambedkar's period?

The district under reference represents very active cultural tradition of Dalits who basically belong to oral tradition and hence continue to draw on the content and form of the *Warkari* and *Bhakti* tradition. In addition to this, Dalit cultural activist of this region seems to have borrowed their critical input from the *Satya Shodhak Jalsa* (Jalsa is a popular theatrical form for mass performance, in the current contexts with strong social messages) tradition of Mahatma Phule.

For example, one of the early cultural activist Keruba Gaikwad derived his critical input from the *Jalsa* tradition that originated first in Western Maharashtra and later spread to parts of Vidarbha. For example, Keruba Gaikwad actually began his cultural activism with the form of *Tamasha*<sup>20</sup> in the mid-forties with the sole intention of entertainment. Later on he moved away from the *Tamasha* to *Ambedkari Jalsa* and seems to have established his own *Ambedkari Jalsa* in the late 1940s, thanks to the *Ambedkari Jalsa* tradition of Manmad town in Jalgaon district which had cultural influence on Gaikwad.<sup>21</sup>

This cultural activism of Dalits from this district and also from the neighbouring district organized its plots and themes around Ambedkar's ideology of equality, justice, fraternity and individual progress through employment.<sup>22</sup>

It is also interesting to note that the cultural activity of Keruba Gaikwad also revolved around the contestation of cultural code regarding greetings and hence the plot in his *Jalsa* would involve the popularization of "Jai Bhim" instead of "Johar Maibap" which the movement considered to be culturally inferior and therefore demeaning for the Dalit.<sup>23</sup> This contestation of cultural code

imposed by the upper caste on Dalits and literary form of upper castes is clear from the following song composed by Gaikwad,

*“Ye samrana tu bhim raya dhayavi mati maj rana,  
Purvi pujile Gajanana! Taycha aikla ahmi chavatpana”*<sup>24</sup>

In this particular son, Gaikwad offers an alternative opening devotional song of *Jalsa* and in which instead of God Ganapati which invariable figures in the devotional song of the upper caste cultural life and activity, Kerubuwa is brings Ambedkar in the devotional songs. In fact, as it is clear from the above song, Gaikwad says that earlier the Dalits worshiped the god Ganapati but now they have discover that the God Ganapati is tricky.<sup>25</sup> Kerubuwa thus would advise Dalits to acquire scientific temper and stop worshiping the Hindu gods.<sup>26</sup>

Dinbandhu Shegaonkar, another leading literary figure and cultural activist who followed Gaikwad, seems to have handled various cultural and more particularly literary forms for radicalising Dalit masses around the ideology that was propagated by Ambedkar. For example, Dinbandhu's following song was sung in every household for its focus on the importance of education among Dalits.

*“Ghari noko rahu Madhu, Shalet jai!  
As kas tule samajat nahi”*<sup>27</sup>

Like Gaikwad, Dinbandhu also tried to mobilise Dalit masses against superstition, idol worship and also the Hindu pilgrimage.<sup>28</sup> This project of rationalism of Dinbandhu is clear from the following song that he composed for Dalit masses.

*“Ajwar kele navas bhav bhakti thevuni!  
Pandharpur, Kashi keli payi payi javauni!  
Kahi nase Farak jhala”*<sup>29</sup>

In this particular song, Dinbandhu emphasises that pilgrimage does not change your material condition and this has reference to the same advise Dr. Ambedkar was giving to his wife Ramabai when she expressed her desire to visit Pandharpur for pilgrimage.<sup>30</sup>

Although both these leading *Shahirs* Gaikwad and Dinbandhu led the cultural protest in this part of the state by drawing their ideological input from Ambedkar and also by collectively problematising the role of Bhakti movement in effecting the radical social change they seem to be differing from each other particularly in terms of forms. For example, unlike Kerubuwa, Dinbandhu borrows the form of *Abhang* from the *Warkari* tradition<sup>31</sup> and also invokes the symbol of Chokha through his form of *Sloka*.<sup>32</sup> While Gaikwad takes the Pandava symbol if not the Bhakti symbols from the Mahabharata tradition in order to reach out to Dalits in this district.<sup>33</sup> However, there seems to be a cultural continuum between the pre-Ambedkar cultural activity and the Ambedkarist cultural activity in this district.

Both these *Shahirs* basically belonged to Akola town, but their audience was predominantly rural Dalit masses. These *shahirs* created linkages with rural Dalit cultural activists with oral tradition. These rural Dalit cultural activists tried to spread the social message of Ambedkar by through the *kalapathak* (a folk musical theatre which involves the director who is also a lyricist and the chorus performing the double function of playing a role in the play written and directed by himself). This *Kalapathak* cultural forms usually involve the songs composed by the *Shahirs* and the theme exclusively written by the latter. Thus, the *kalapathak* served as an effective medium which made the socially purposeful *shahiri* popular among rural Dalit masses. It is also true that the rural cultural activists created their own authentic forms that were very closed to common Dalits from the rural area. For example, Dalit cultural troops from Ghusar village led by Gopnarayan from Akola district used the *Kalapthak*<sup>34</sup> form for mobilizing Dalits. While by one of the popular Dalit cultural activist Srawan Telgote popularly known as Srawan Bapu from Akot taluka of Akola district used very effectively the *Khanjiri Bhajan* (which usually involved only a single instrument). Finally, Dalits also used “*Bhajan*” (a group of subaltern singers and musicians performing mostly at the level of village but occasionally also performing at the Taluka level). Among all the three forms, the last form of *Bhajan* was most popular and effective because it could be easily organized with

minimum musical instrument like Harmonium, Dholki, Tal and Chondak. Secondly, it did not involve any long travel and hence these subaltern groups could perform for the local people without losing their daily employment. As we shall see in the subsequent section, this form is still very popular and effective among Dalits of this district.

These subaltern cultural groups during Ambedkar's time mobilised Dalit people basically against the feudal exploitation. These groups from the villages, through their performance would attack those Dalits who continued to perform the feudal and therefore demeaning occupations under the "Vethbegari" system. (unpaid forced labour). For example, a Bhajan group (village based loosely organized musical group) led by J K Wankhade, Waman Wankahade, Shankar Sapkal and Shriram Sapkal would launch a cultural assault on those Dalits who would not give up these demeaning occupations. This cultural revolt is evident from the following song composed by this group.

*"Kisanrao Ghamadya Leka! Harijan Jhala Kasa."*<sup>35</sup>

This particular song of this group is important not only for creating new metaphors but also for contesting the very category *Harijan*. This group considered the category *Harijan* regressive and hence it is equated with newly created category of "Ghamdyा" meaning a person without self respect and hence is also *Harijan*.<sup>36</sup> It also suggests that while these mudhouse writers have borrowed their critical input from urban based Dalit writers they at the same time also created their own cultural idioms like "Ghamdyा".

Secondly the village based cultural groups while creating a social consciousness among Dalits against feudal exploitation did not remain confined only to the social sphere. In fact they also tried to mobilize Dalits in favour of the Scheduled Caste Federation politics. Their major cultural assertion was also directed against the Congress politics particularly its stand on the *Samyukta Maharashtra* issue. They, tried to sensate the Dalit masses against the Congress Politics during the *Samyukta Maharashtra* movement (a movement for the formation of a linguistic state of

Maharashtra uniting all Marathi speaking people and areas). For example, during the early 1950s, some of the Congress leaders from Vidarbha region took a stand in favour of separate Nagvidarbha. Some of the Dalit cultural activists from this district seem to have opposed this move and condemned these separatists leaders including the Dalits among them through their songs of this period.

*“Nagvidarbha kony gavashyne kadhali!  
Tayt Awalecha Mela Jhala ani Biyanicha Murda gela!”*<sup>38</sup>

The above song condemns Babu Awale a Dalit leader from Nagpur and Brijlal Biyani, one of the important Congress leaders from the Vidarbha for their demand for separate Vidarbha. This song also reflects another dimension of Dalit cultural consciousness in that the cultural activity of the Dalit from this region did not remain confined only to cultural aspiration of the Dalit people, on the contrary, it also moved away from the immediate to the universal both in terms of content and also the social base of the audience. For example, the *Kalapathak* unit led by Tukaram Gopnarayan of Ghusar village near Akola, would go around the entire district and organize the programmes basically on the *Samyukta Maharashtra* issue and on the theme of Mahatma Phule's struggle against the crafty and cruel Brahmins of Pune who tried to use Dalits in order to get rid of Phule.<sup>39</sup> And this plot (theme) on Phule would always attract the audience from the Mali (gardener) community to this *kalapathak* of Dalits. Thus, the second phase of the cultural expression of Dalits from this region also shows the simultaneous opening out of Dalits to cultural, social and political process of mobilization.

### **Kalapathak Tradition among the Dalits (IIInd Phase)**

In the above section, we have already seen that Dalits used the *Kalapathak* both for entertainment as well as politicization of Dalit masses. This medium of mobilization became more popular among Dalits of this district after Ambedkar, roughly from 1957 to 1975. This period represent the third phase of Dalit cultural movement in this region. This *Kalapathak* tradition that began in early 1950s from Ghusar village now multiplied into as many

as 25 *Kalapathak* units all over Akola districts.<sup>40</sup> There are basically five major reasons that made the *Kalapathak* form so prominent and effective among Dalits of this region.

First, Akola was one of the first three places (other two being Nagpur and Chandrapur) where two thousand people got converted into Buddhism immediately on the third day of the actual conversion that took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Oct. 1956 in the presence of Ambedkar.<sup>41</sup> This conversion movement provided the context to the *kalapathak* which handled plots on the teaching of Buddha. Almost every *kalapathak* programme would start with Buddhist *Trisharan* and *Panchsheel* end with Buddhist Prayer as perceived by Ambedkar. Secondly, Dalit writers like Dinbandhu handled other cultural forms to make Buddhist symbols integral parts of Dalit consciousness. For achieving this Buddhist cultural impact, Dinbandhu composed some of the most popular *slokas* to be recited by the mud house writers on an appropriate occasion like marriage feast.

*“hey! Buddha Shreshtha Karunadhanare!  
hey! Bhimraya Din pawanare!  
hey sant chokha jay jotiraya!  
ya Bhojanala jaldit yaya!”<sup>42</sup>*

In the above song Dinbandhu not only re-invokes the images of Buddha, Chokha, Phule and Ambedkar, but he also provides a sort of aesthetic dimension to the cultural life of the Dalits who would otherwise take their food served quite routinely on such occasion. Thus, Buddhist conversion movement did in the past and would continue to provide as we shall see once again in the following section the cultural context to the *kalapathak* tradition of Dalits of this District and the entire region of four Districts of Varhad.

Second, the Dalit land grab movement led by Bhaurao Gaikwad in 1959 and 1964 in fact provided an opportunity for the cultural activists of this district to revolutionize Dalit masses both against the local power structure and the state. Dalit cultural activists from the villages Lohari, Sherimalegaon, Walegaon Sasti and Hatrun were particularly very active during this land struggle.

They maintained the critical energies among the Dalits and enhanced the confidence of the latter through the composition of songs against Congress politics.<sup>43</sup>

Third, political movement of Dalits was also responsible for the popularity of the *Kalapathak* tradition among the Dalits of this district. For example, some of the leading *Kalapathak* units led by Haribhau Shamaskar of Sheri village, Tulsiram Dengre of Hatrun, Srawan Telgote of Akot organised musical and cultural programs in order to campaign for the election of the Republican Party of India Candidate in 1957, 1962 and 1967 state Assembly elections.<sup>44</sup>

Fourth, the spread of education among the mud house writers also helped them in writing the script and selecting the theme of the *kalapathaks* themselves. They could now create the cultural resources on their own without deriving their cue from urban based writers like Dinbandhu.

Finally, the very form of *Kalapathak* was considered to be the most appropriate one in as much as it did not demand an elaborate arrangement and it could be organised with small wooden platform so as to make artists visible to the audience sitting on the plain ground. And naked bamboo frame would be raised so as to give the audience the sense of regular (proscenium) theatre. This bamboo frame was very often used to hang gas lamps. Moreover, this form also fulfilled the hidden patriarchal agenda and need of keeping the woman out of the *kalapathak* tradition. It was a common practice among the *Kalapathak* to keep women out of the troupes due to the hang over of the *Tamasha* in which Dalit women danced to entertain the feudal lords. These memories of *Tamasha* tradition led the Dalit patriarchy to impose cultural restriction on Dalit women who did not to play female roles in such *kalapathak* program. In the absence of the female character, this role was usually performed by Dalit males. Thus, the *kalapathak* had the female role played be a male however, the female costumes could be borrowed from the local Dalit women. *Kalapathak* did not require a professional comedian and this role could be played by any Dalit person easily available in every village. In terms of finance

this *kalapthak* required very little, only for buying musical instruments and for travelling. Food and other sundry expenses were taken care of by Dalits who would host the programme. Finally, organizing *kalapathak* was relatively easy because these programmes were usually arranged during the summer which is not the peak season for the employment hence Dalits would not lose their wages. All these factors made the *kalapathak* form popular among Dalits of this district.

In terms of content, apart from its political consideration, these self supporting *kalapathak* units focused mainly on the question of material existence and human dignity. Thus, the *kalapathak* scripts revolved mostly around the question of caste and material exploitation of Dalits by the rich peasantry. At the same time, they also focused on the political schism in Dalit politics. They would use family as a metaphor to expose the political infighting among Dalit political leaders.<sup>45</sup> Apart from this, these *kalapathak*w included themes on Dalit women's harassment by in-laws. In the *kalapathak* tradition the mud house writers made very bold attempt to cast Dalit daughter-in-law in a very militant image and would show that she has the courage to fight this family torture.<sup>46</sup> In the program of *kalapathak*, this gender issue would be taken up in a dialogical mode between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law. And this dialogical form would have good impact on the audience mostly from the Dalit locality.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the *kalapathaks* from this region really sharpened the political consciousness of masses not only against the state and local centres of power but also against Dalit patriarchy - but to a limited extent since they did not like Dalit women taking part in the actual *kalapathak* performance. They also kept a critical distance from the cultural channels of the establishment. Like the Mahars of Thane who refused to perform the music for their Muslim lords <sup>48</sup> (Zelliot) they refused to perform or sing for the dominant political forces.<sup>44</sup> At times, this subaltern cultural resistance and assertion showed remarkable confidence and courage to criticize the political and social moves of even the most important leaders like Bahurao Gaikwad. For example, Tulsiram Dongre in his following song which was very often used

in the *kalapathak* is highly critical of the unity move of the RPI with the Congress in 1967. He says,

*“kai sangava ya dada saheb gaikwadala!  
Kotwalki karache Shikvito ahmala”<sup>45</sup>*

In this particular song Dongre interprets and understands the Dalit alliance with Congress as amounting to the subordination of Dalits to upper caste Congress politics. Similarly, in another popular song, Dongre criticizes the Congress attempt which sought to reintroduce the *Kotwali* (feudal traditional and demeaning occupation) among the Dalits. He says:

*“Kotwali pattayawar lihile Mahar!  
Buddhane kai kasavi Kamar”<sup>46</sup>*

In both songs, Dongre is highly critical of Congress and Gaikwad who he feels was also a party to such Congress design. Thus, Dalit cultural resistance from Akola district was sensitive and the most authentic cultural expression which could not be gobbled up by the establishment.

At the same time, as the above song shows the Buddhist consciousness does have a bearing on both the issue of radicalising the masses against the regressive politics of RPI as well as on the oral literary tradition of the mud house writers like Dongre.

### **Decline of Kalapathak Tradition**

However, this most authentic and therefore more vibrant cultural movement began to decline from the 1969. This decline of *kalapathak* tradition can be explained in terms of the following factors.

#### *Colonization of the Dalit Cultural Movement*

First, it is really paradoxical to understand that on the one hand Dalit literary movement emerging in the urban centres was offering a paradigmatic shift in the literary landscape in Maharashtra but on the other hand the *kalapathak* tradition was fast receding into the background. How does one understand this contradiction? We will have to understand this paradox may

be in the later sections of this work, but what is urgent here is to find out reason that can explain this decline.

The political subordination of Dalit politics to the Congress Party in Maharashtra also shows the corresponding subordination of Dalit cultural movement in this region. After 1970, Dalit cultural movement was taken over as if it were, by the state. In the sense that now these *kalapathaks* would involve the themes of the Family Planning and prohibition which formed part of package of various welfare schemes introduced by the state.<sup>47</sup> Those subaltern writers and cultural activists like Tulsiram Dongre who once offered severe criticism of the State and the Congress politics through their popular songs, with an incisive edge, however, later on began composing songs and wrote plots for the government on family planning and prohibition.<sup>48</sup> In the entire Kalapathak programs which were usually funded by the state government, Dalit singers would sing songs that would legitimise government policy and Ambedkar in the whole government sponsored scheme would find some space at the fag end of the programme. It was essentially guilt feeling that would make Dalits sing one or two songs on Ambedkar and Buddha and the government would not take serious objection as it would also help the government to use these cultural symbols for its own legitimisation. In this regard it is ironical to mention that Dalit cultural activists on earlier occasion had fought with the social welfare department of the government of Maharashtra, as it tried to exclude a song on Ambedkar from the cultural *kalapathak* competition that the government had held at Bhambari village in 1967.<sup>49</sup> Now these cultural activist would sing for the government without any complain. Thus, in Gramscian category of Transformism, the liberal politicians from the Congress party, transformed the erstwhile Dalit opponents into their allies by the use or abuse of government patronage.<sup>50</sup> (Richard B. Bellamy, Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings, Cambridge, 1994, p. x1)

### *Politics of Misappropriation of Dalit Cultural Initiative*

Similarly, the dominant politics in the state tried to appropriate Dalit cultural movement and hence these dominant political

forces are directly responsible for the deflection of the cultural movement from this region. For example, the *Bhajan Mandali* from the villages which on earlier occasion sung the song of Buddha and Ambedkar now became subordinated to Congress politics which regularly used the state resources in order to co-opt Dalit cultural activists. It is not only the Congress which used the cultural initiative of Dalits for its political ends even the *Shetkari Sanghtana* (peasant's organisation) also used this popular musical tradition for mobilising the peasantry in the state.<sup>51</sup> Now the Dalits of Lohari khurd in Akot taluka of this District have bought sophisticated musical instruments and compete with the another Dalit caste Matangs which till yesterday considered it to be its monopoly to play music on the marriage ceremonies of the high caste. There is no doubt that these young Dalit artists now use these new musical instruments for celebrating Ambedkar and Buddha Birth anniversaries but at certain level, this musical engagement leads these Dalits to deviate from their primary cultural concern in the sense that they have to play the music as the hiring party would like them to play. They certainly cannot sing the song of Ambedkar in the marriage of the high caste people. Thus, this kind of professionalism has affected the authenticity and autonomy of these cultural troops from this district.

### *Ever worsening material condition*

Apart from this, a kind of professionalism in the musical tradition of the Dalits, worsening material conditions is the basic cause for the decline of the *kalapathak* and popular musical tradition among Dalits of some of the villages of this district. Hence, it is not out of conviction that these Dalits have taken to this kind of professionalism it is their poor conditions which have led them to try additional means that would help them to earn some livelihood. Secondly, the abject poverty of some of the most promising singers led the former to migrate from the region for survival and this ultimately disturbed the entire *Kalapathak* unit.<sup>52</sup> Dalit cultural activists who are, by and large, landless agricultural labourers do not have employment guarantee and can not continue to devote time for rehearsals and actual

performances of the *kalapathak* which requires at least two or three days for its performance which the Dalit artist cannot afford to spare due to the more pressing material need. The net result is that they are forced to give up the more rigorous forms like *kalapathak*.

### *Callousness of Dalit Political Leaders*

The callous attitude and criminal neglect on the part of Dalit political leaders has been responsible for the decline of the *Kalapathak* tradition among the Dalits of this region. Political leaders after Ambedkar never recognized the importance of the cultural activist who right from Ambedkar's time played very effective role in radicalising Dalit masses. In this regard it is interesting to note what Ambedkar himself said about the Dalit cultural activist.

He, while recognising the role Dalit *Shahirs*, said "The political importance of one *shahir* is equal to ten political leaders".<sup>53</sup> The callousness of the political leaders after Ambedkar was lamented by one of the prominent cultural activists Haribhau Shamskar who said that he sang for the RPI but the RPI leaders did not bother to inquire whether he ate or not. While he said he had to starve and some time when no food could be arranged the entire unit survived eating "*Oombar*" - a kind of wild fig. Ironically enough, at the same time these political leaders relished nutritious food.<sup>54</sup> However, it was not the experience of Haribhau alone from this region.

Even some of the leading state level artist had a same bitter experience with RPI political leaders. For example, Waman Kardak, the most powerful Dalit *Shahir* that Maharashtra has produced for radicalising Dalits on a variety of political issues including Dalit land struggle of 1959 and 1964 and who became the household name among the Dalits said "I used to offer different definition of democracy in my brief speech that usually preceded my actual singing. But the local political leaders would not like my acquiring an intellectual space as they felt threatened to lose their audience to me".<sup>55</sup> He further said that these Dalit politicians never cared about these artist but they themselves

managed to eat to their fullest satisfaction.<sup>56</sup> Kardak, whose popular songs covered wide range of issues from Dalit issues to now globalization, made seminal contribution towards the radicalizing of Dalit masses but this contribution was totally neglected by Dalit leaders. However, thanks to the efforts made by Asha Kendra, Puntamba and Village Medical Service at Kamalnagar, Karnataka, who recognised the importance of Kardak and offered him every necessary support <sup>57</sup> he managed to pull on. Thus, Dalit political leaders who thought that they can create and sustain critical political energies among Dalit masses without paying attention to culture and its carriers are however sadly mistaken. Because the Dalit cultural impulses are being gobbled up the state on the one hand and the Hindutava forces on the other. However, for such a kind of cultural crisis within the Dalit scenario the neglect by Dalit politicians is certainly responsible. But it is also true that, the Dalit cultural activists remained only reactive to such kind of regressive politics of Dalit politicians. They did not try to offer any political alternative by invoking their own authentic form of politics. Actually, they criticized Dalit politics within the limits of mainstream liberal political frame work without seeking any alliance or assistance from the radical political forces that were operating almost simultaneously.

### *Decline of Dalit Political Movement*

The decline of an organised cultural response to Dalit politics can be attributed to the general slack in the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. It is believed that the vibrant political movement is the pre-condition for any active and viable cultural movement and to this extent the decline of *Kalapathak* movement in this district can be understood in term of the over all lack of Dalit organized movement. Instead of organised movement what one finds is the organised efforts on the part of Dalit power brokers to share crumbs of power that in turn uses these brokers for its instrumentalist politics. This kind of every day form of petty politics of Dalits replaces the need for any organised political movement and hence as a result we don't have any sustainable cultural movement in this region and even in Maharashtra.

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### *Invasion of Electronic Media*

The spread of cinema and video culture is another important reason for the decline of the authentic cultural movement in this region of the state. Cinema and video that were quite far from the cultural life of Dalits have now reached almost every village of the state. This has led to the diversion of Dalits from their traditional and authentic cultural activities and expressions. The video parlour now caters to the needs of Dalit youth who any way have undergone drastic change in their cultural taste. Dalit youth today do not have ability, enthusiasm and patience to devote time for rehearsals and preparations for any cultural programmes because they are kept busy right from the morning by the video show which starts screening Hindi Masala (commercial formula) movies till the late hours in the night. This subversion of the cultural movement by video is rightly criticized by Tulsiram Dongre in his latest popular song.

*“Bhimrayachya Bhajanat Man Nahi Lagat!  
Peticha Mater kela Tabal puranat!”<sup>57</sup>*

This particular song by Dongre ironically shows that the Ambedkar-centred Dalit popular Music is no more attractive for the young Dalit and then Petty (harmonium) and Tabla that was once used for singing Ambedkar's song is now relegated to the dustbin of the historical past by these Dalit youth.

### *Lack of Mainstream Dalit Literary Intervention*

Six, there is another factor which is perhaps marginally responsible for the decline of cultural movement in this region. In the third phase, as we have seen that urban based Dalit writers would write plots and poetry and popular songs in the cultural idiom that were very closed to the common Dalit masses. Now urban writers like Dinbandhu who once wrote in the language of the masses write in academic language in order to react to the adversaries of Ambedkar.<sup>58</sup> Thus, this academic orientation, as we shall see in the following sections, necessarily leads to the deviation from the subaltern concern if it is not properly blended with the interest of the mud house writers.

Finally, the decline of *Kalapathak* tradition in this region can be understood in terms of the corresponding shift in the social base of the Buddhist cultural movement. In this region, as we have seen earlier in this monograph, Buddhist themes formed the core of the *kalapathak* tradition which was basically controlled by the Dalit male. Even everyday Buddhist cultural activities like Buddha *Vandana* (prayer) and *Pravachan* (sermon) were done by the Dalit male. In all, the Dalit male used to participate in the Buddhist cultural activities with a lot of interest. Now today there is a steady decline of Dalit male's participation in the day to day Buddhist activity although many of them continue to throng to Nagpur on Dhammadhakra Pravartan day the Buddhist cultural movement is resented by one of the leading madhouse writers Gun Ratna Tayade who says in one of his songs,

*“Inakaran May tumale dhamma Dawal,  
tumche wagne Baghun male ichu Chwala”*<sup>59</sup>

In this particular song Tayade expresses through Ambedkar terrible disappointment for having given Buddha's Dhamma to the Dalits who are deserting the Buddhist Dhamma. We have already seen that the video culture has done a lot of damage to the cultural inclination of Dalits. But what is heartening from the point of view of the Buddhist is that at least in this region, the Buddhist cultural movement came to be led by the Dalit women who have given an organised expression to Buddhist cultural movement through forming a number of Buddhist *Mahila Mandal* (women's groups) which are different both from the upper caste and government sponsored *mahila mandals*. Thus, Dalit women have become the major carriers of the Buddhist Ambedkar message and mission.

## Interface between Ambedkar and Dalit Feminist Cultural Movement

It is historically true that Dalit women from different parts of Maharashtra participated in Ambedkar's movement.<sup>60</sup> There is evidence to show that even Dalit women from Akola participated in Ambedkar's movement. The participation, however, differed both within the region under reference and also across different

regions in the state. It is difficult to go into the details of this issue. We are interested in the following questions: What are the variations in the feminist cultural consciousness? Are there shifts in this feminist consciousness? If yes, what are the modes that can throw light in understanding this shift? In other words, to what extent can one understand this shift in cultural consciousness and relate this cultural response of Dalit feminists to Ambedkar's movement? And from where did the feminist cultural activists derive their critical input? In other words, what are the literary forms and cultural idioms that these Dalit women adopt in order to contribute to the process of radicalization of over all political consciousness of Dalits in Maharashtra?

During the pre-Ambedkar period, the cultural activities of Dalit women from this region basically revolved round the cultural life and symbols from the high caste Hindu cultural tradition. This is reflected in the folk songs that were composed and sung by Dalit women in devotion of various goddesses like *Matamai*, from the little tradition and even about God Mahadev.<sup>61</sup> This is true of other regions in the state as well.<sup>62</sup> During Ambedkar period, Dalit women were relegated to the background in the sense that they could not take part in the cultural movement - both literary and musical - except in the *Tamasha* tradition that perhaps kept Dalit women permanently out of the cultural activities of Dalits in the state. Therefore, we do not have any Dalit women finding space in the cultural activities of *Ambedkari jalsas* or later on in the *kalapathak* tradition in the post-Ambedkar period. Even in *Ektara* musical tradition, Dalit women had to play secondary role in supporting their husband who would play the leading role.<sup>63</sup> By and large, Dalit women from this region were invisible from the cultural landscape that was completely dominated by the Dalit male. It is also reported that some Dalit women supported Dalit cultural movement in this district.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the moral code imposed by Dalit patriarchy forced Dalit women to the private sphere and thus denied them any public visibility.

Particularly in the post-Ambedkar phase, however, Dalit women from this region, seem to have broken their cultural silence and

seem to have stormed into the public transcript to use James Scott's language.<sup>65</sup> They composed songs and sung them both on the grinding stone, birth ceremony, naming ceremony and also during agricultural operations like weeding, and harvesting wheat and jowar, and plucking cotton. These Dalit women now would not sing the songs of Goddess from the little tradition, instead would sing the songs of Ambedkar and his wife Ramabai. These women used sing the songs of Ambedkar and his wife Ramabai. These women used metaphors and cultural idioms like *Palna* and *Ovi* which were the most suitable forms for these women particularly with oral tradition. While *palna* as a form was used only on the special occasion of Ambedkar's birth anniversary *Ovi* was used as a very effective cultural idiom to create and conserve critical energies among Dalit men and women. *Ovi*, at one level, reflected the cultural polemic of Dalits against the cultural modes of the upper caste women, and at another level, it also reflected the strong emotional inclination to cultural symbol of Ambedkar. This twin purpose of *Ovi* composed by Dalit women is clear from the following example.

*"Maya dari Nib! Nibale Phullera  
Babasahebanchy kotale Sonaychi zalar!"<sup>66</sup>*

In this particular *Ovi* the Dalit woman in her cultural polemic with the high caste women attempts to inflate the cultural image of Ambedkar by imagining the golden tassels on the three piece suit of Ambedkar.

She also suggests through this *Ovi* that this golden tassel is far more precious than the rose on the jacket of Nehru. This juxtaposing Ambedkar against Nehru integrated literary imagination of Dalit women with political consciousness in as much as it questioned the cultural symbols from the dominant politics of the Congress. It is also interesting to note here that oral poetry or songs of the Dalit women from Marathwada also revolved around the cultural polemics which had bearing on the contradiction between Dalit politics and the Congress politics in the state. For example, Dalit women from Marathwada pitched Ambedkar against Nehru in the following *Ovi*.

*“Nehruchi Baiko Nehrula sangi Gyan!  
Jawa Bhimala sharan!”<sup>67</sup>*

In this particular *ovi* the Dalit woman suggests that Nehru should accept the leadership and superiority of Ambedkar. Moreover, this *Ovi* also suggests that Nehru's wife is more considerate and liberal, therefore, she can advice Nehru accordingly. The cultural polemic of Dalit women with the upper caste women is evident from the following *Ovi*.

*“Madi varti Madi sat talachi madi!  
Ramabai Walu Ghalte sari!”<sup>68</sup>*

This particular *Ovi* suggests that even the Dalit can have huge palatial structures than the non-Dalits. Thus, this literary imagination indicates the cultural contestation of the upper caste cultural symbols by these Dalit women.

However, it seems that this cultural consciousness of Dalit women is influenced by modernist ambitions and it also tends to operate under the shadow of male Dalit political leaders and the political stereotypes that were imposed by the male Dalit leaders on the dalit women who seem to have internalized these stereotypes. This is evident from the following *Ovi* which no doubt is composed by a Dalit women but its content is the calculated construction of Dalit politics which is based on certain kinds of stereotypes.

*“Sonaychi anghthi! Chandicha Mudarka Babasahebanchy  
Botat!  
Bamnin Ghat Kela vish Pajale takat!”<sup>69</sup>*

The literary meaning of the above *ovi* is that Ambedkar did not die a natural death but the Brahmin woman poisoned him through the buttermilk. Ambedkar's death was the result of the grand design of the Brahminical forces is the stereotypes which is the part of the popular Dalit imagination all over the state. However, Dalit women from Marathwada who composed the *Ovi*, have a different perception of Ambedkar's marriage with a Brahmin woman and this difference in perception is clear from the following *ovis* composed by Dalit women from Marathwada.

*“Dilli Shahrat Haldi Kunkwachi Mori!  
Bhim navardeo Bhata Bamnachya Ghari!”<sup>70</sup>*

In this particular *Ovi* the Dalit women consider the Ambedkar's marriage to a Brahmin woman a matter of scoring a symbolic victory over an orthodox and obscurantist Brahmanism. At another level, Dalit women would also consider the inter-caste marriage with a Brahmin women as an attempt on the part of Ambedkar to remove the caste barriers from the society. And this anticipation is reflected in the following *Ovi* of the Dalit women from Marathwada region.

*“jati Bhed Ghaviny sathi,  
Bhimani keli Brahmin rani!  
Gangadhrech Nirmal Pani  
Mhanive sarvani Bhimachi Gani”<sup>71</sup>*

In the above *Ovi* Dalit women locate the social message in Ambedkar's marriage and in a way, also suggest that others should follow Ambedkar's example.

Thus, the above forms of literary and cultural activism of Dalit women certainly show that are their cultural activism is subordinated to the grand design of the stereotypes that are consciously constructed by Dalit political leaders.

To this extent it can be argued that these Dalit women are objectified as carriers of these political stereotypes. But as our evidence shows that it is not always the case; that these Dalit women are found enjoying certain degree of literary and cultural autonomy and they refuse to become mere carriers of Dalit male constructed stereotypes. Actually, Dalit women's resistance is articulated in their cultural activism through which they seem to have maintained the critical edge while borrowing their critical input from the male Dalit writers. For example, Dalit women of Akola district did borrow their critical input from Dinbandhu but they also gave it a militant and more effective and radical form. For example, in the original composition i.e. *Palana* of Dinbandhu, it says “look at the religion of Brahmin”<sup>72</sup> but at the receiving level of Dalit women it would become “look at the arrogant Brahmin”.<sup>73</sup> This kind of extrapolation by Dalit

women rejects the more abstract and also soft cultural mode that Dinbandhu is adopting.

Similarly, Dalit women did not borrow unconditionally from the male Dalit writers but seem to have enjoyed some cultural autonomy in choosing their symbols and metaphors very close to their life situations which formed part of their cultural tradition. This adoption of the authentic forms part of their cultural tradition. This adoption of the authentic form by the Dalit women also shows the historical continuity and cultural overlap in the cultural activity of Dalit women. This is very much evident from the following *Ovi* composed by Dalit women.

*“Pachvi mazi Ovi ga Pach Pandavala!  
Sukhane gele Bhim Vilaytela”<sup>74</sup>*

In this particular *Ovi* the Dalit women are praying to Five Pandavaa from Mahabharat tradition so that Ambedkar would have safe trip to London. This use of cultural symbols from the Mahabharat tradition also indicates the linkages of Dalit feminist cultural consciousness with the Mahanubhav tradition that was very prominent among the Dalits of this District. This cultural overlap is also evident from the *Ovi* from the Marathwada region. But here the Dalit women from Marathwada region seem to have taken their cultural symbols from the Ramayana culture of great tradition. They while composing the *Ovi* have replaced Ram with Bhim and with this replacement they reformulated an *Ovi* which at the receiving end would read in the following manner.

*“Bhim Karat Bali Bhim Abe Bhala!  
Dusman lokanchy hani Chati Mandi Bhala!”<sup>75</sup>*

Thus, the literary and cultural tradition among Dalit women from Maharashtra does show an autonomous cultural creation. Far more important is cultural development which highlights how Dalit women through their musical tradition transcend both the physical as well as mental boundaries in acquiring the cultural space well out side their Bouddhwada. Dalit women who were absolutely invisible from the cultural and literary sphere now have organized themselves through forming so many *mahila mandals* which basically function for spreading the Message of

Bouddha teaching from village to village.<sup>76</sup> All these *Mahila Mandals* are named after the Buddhist cultural symbols like Lumbini, Vishakha so and so forth. These *Mandals* not only teach the basic *Trisaran* and *Panchshil*, but also sensitise Dalit masses to Ambedkar's ideology as well. These *Mandals* now cover the entire district and of late they have started staging cultural programmes at the Diksha Bhumi at Nagpur on every Conversion day and also at Chaitya Bhumi at Mumbai. It is also interesting to note that some of the Dalit women from the villages could appear on the Bombay T.V. with their cultural program.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, the above Dalit feminist cultural intervention definitely indicates cultural assertion of Dalit women in social struggles both against the Brahminical social order as well as against the state. However, these Dalit women are till today culturally rooted in the oral tradition and hence have to borrow from the Dalit male and therefore are still vulnerable to the cultural dictation of the Dalit men who have devised gender specific cultural and literary forms like *Palna* and in some cases *Ovi* for the Dalit women.<sup>78</sup> Similarly whatever little cultural and literary visibility that Dalit women get has been possible with the initiative of their Dalit male counterparts<sup>79</sup> who in fact are dependent on the literary forms that have been provided to them by Hindi cinema. In fact, some of the leading Dalit literary figures from Akola district, like Kisan Shamaskar, Dinbandhu, Tulsiram Dongre, and now Samdur all have patterned their song on the style and rhythm of Hindi film songs.<sup>80</sup> When we asked them why could not they adopt entirely a new rhythm for their popular songs they said that Hindi movie style is immediately available.<sup>81</sup> However, this kind of borrowing from Hindi movie has been severely criticize by mainstream Dalit literary figures from the state.

### Cultural Hierarchies within the Dalit Literary Discourse

The Hindi movie style that is adopted both by male and female Dalit artists from this district, and I am sure it is true of other regions as well, is much resented by the urban, educated and "established" Dalit writers from mainstream Dalit literature.<sup>82</sup>

Theses rather elitist Dalit literary writers both male and female have condemned and criticized this oral literary tradition of the mud house Dalit writers as vulgar and obscurantist for adopting forms from Hindi movies and even from non-Dalit tradition.<sup>83</sup> These mainstream Dalit writers have treated this literary creation of the subaltern variety as a total surrender to the vedic tradition.<sup>84</sup> While some Dalit writers from the mainstream Dalit literary camp did not recognise the very existence of this cultural assertion from below and now, out of guilt, as if it were, would offer post-facto justification that they were forced to neglect this expression as they had to engage themselves in producing competent literary forms that would get approval in the literary court, as if it were, of mainstream Marathi literature. It seems that these Dalit literary figures from the urban centres while pleading their case of literary recognition in this Court would refuse to recognize the literary creation of their own people.<sup>85</sup>

While some of the more sensitive and objective Dalit literary figures like Arjun Dangle and Baburao Bagul, have accepted that Dalit literature has not been able to reach out to the life of the common Dalits.<sup>86</sup> While there is no disagreement at least among those who would always prefer the historical role of giving literary visibility and authentic voice to Dalits who otherwise made just guest appearance in mainstream Marathi literature scene. It was also welcomed and justified because it was aimed at undermining the cultural hierarchies constructed by upper caste dominated literary circles. Dalit literature was also desirable in as much as it enriched overall Marathi literature through creating new metaphors and creative literary forms with transformative potentials. The emergence of Dalit literature in the early 1970s was welcomed for another and perhaps the most important reason that it offered revolutionary alternative to Dalit cultural movement which was already colonized not only in this district but elsewhere in the state. And hence the Dalit literary movement demonstrated remarkable ability and courage to contest this kind of state appropriation of Dalit cultural movement.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the Dalit literary movement offered an opportunity and promise to provide the radical context to Dalit cultural movement in the state. In fact many of its protagonist

claimed that this Dalit literary movement is going to give a historical lead to not only the cultural movement but the overall political movement of the Dalit.<sup>88</sup>

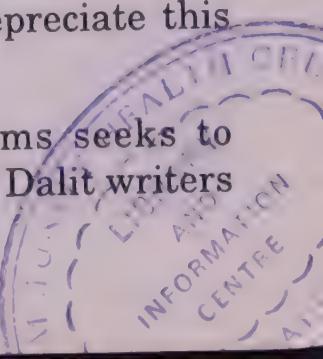
And yet one cannot be sure whether this movement has been able to defend its claim of giving historical lead to the Dalit political movement. The crises of stagnation in which the Dalit movement at present is caught up and the very inaccessibility of the common Dalit to such kind of literary creation raises serious doubts about its grand project of creating alternative subjectivity and emancipatory sensibility among Dalits in Maharashtra and therefore by implication Akola district. Why have Dalit literary figures been introducing the same cultural hierarchies within Dalit settings against which they fought in the first instance? Why are they denigrating the mud house Dalit writers for latter's using forms of the Bhakti tradition or the Hindi cinema?

Let me begin by addressing myself to the last question first. By running down the oral Dalit literary tradition, the elitist Dalit writers are suggesting that only written and published writing is true literature.

Secondly, this privileging of the written tradition over the oral tradition, also suggests that common Dalits do not deserve to have any access to the so called "puritan Dalit literature". Thus, this, elitist literary perception certainly shows the ontological difference within the Dalit scenario. But how does one understand this difference? There are three factors that can perhaps help us to understand this phenomenon. First, the Dalit writers who seem to have arrogated to themselves this privileged position, seek to distinguish themselves from Dalit literary persons with oral tradition by attributing symbolically higher literary value to their own literary creation. Whether this literature is more valuable or not is a different question, but it is not just accessible to common Dalits who do not have the necessary cultural capital to appreciate or even deprecate this so called valuable literature.

Secondly, this section with elitist literary claims seeks to distinguish themselves from the rest of the common Dalit writers

IC-110  
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and cultural activist by adopting the strategy of “derision”. This strategy involves the condemnation of the symbolic forms produced by the popular literary tradition as brash, gauche, vulgar, immature and unrefined.

This kind of condemnation of popular Dalit literary tradition stems from the following factors. First, an ever depleting audience from the middle class who now has stopped appreciating mainstream Dalit literature partly because it has become repetitive and hence suffering from stagnation. This stagnation is indicative of the fact that mainstream Dalit literature has been unable to pitch up Dalit literary creation from the mere notion of “how they have become Dalits” to “how they can transcend” level of literature by providing fresh cultural resources that would reactivate at least the urban audience for the counter – hegemonic purposes. Of course there are exception to this.<sup>90</sup>

The contempt towards the mud house Dalit writers therefore stems from the depletion of the non-Dalit middle class audience on the one hand and the lack of supportive conditions among Dalits on the other. In addition to this, the literary stagnation and hence the contempt for the oral tradition is also the result of the routinisation of the literary responses from the captive audience which ritually assemble in the annual Dalit literary meets.

The uncritical or blind inclination and pursuance of the project of modernity by the mainstream Dalit writers is second factor that can explain this ontological difference in the realm of literary and cultural consciousness of the Dalit. Dalits with modernist ambitions, treat every literary creation as an attempt of self-congratulation and feel anxious and triumphant historically. All this however, suggests, at one and the same time, an encapsulation and denial of history to Dalits in the immediacy of the present from which vantage point all previous developments may be completely consigned to the dustbin of tradition. In other words, this modernist consideration, at the theoretical level, assumes that it is only the written tradition which can produce the so called puritan form of cultural expression or literature and thus can be perceived with a linear

process of literary consciousness, leaving no room for understanding the dialectics of Dalit cultural consciousness.

According to this modernist logic, the mud house literary writer among Dalits who shows literary and cultural overlap with other literary tradition is condemned by mainstream Dalit writers in order to justify and uphold their modernist claims. But the cultural relationship of this privileged class of Dalit writers with its customary audience from the urban centres and also with the oral Dalit literary tradition only shows that the mainstream Dalit literary movement entered into a sort of impasse. Who is to blame for this impasse? I think the privileged Dalit writers themselves are to be blamed for this. As we have seen that the Dalit writers' claim of giving both cultural and literary lead to the Dalit movement cannot be sustained because these are the persons who are responsible for maintaining the cultural hierarchies through exercising the social control over the Dalit literary process in Maharashtra. These cultural hierarchies have been maintained by these elitist writers through the following mechanisms.

First, these privileged Dalit writers, in order to maintain their social control over the cultural and intellectual constituency of Dalits, seem to have planned, as if it were, a sort of conspiracy against Dalit masses through controlling the conditions of perception. This is achieved through producing literature which is either highly abstract in form and hence inaccessible to those Dalits who do not have necessary training and ability to comprehend and therefore fully appreciate this abstract language howsoever aesthetically superior.<sup>91</sup> Even Dalit autobiographies which otherwise showed a sort of humanistic cultural continuum with the past with rich and concrete depiction of Dalit popular life, however, remained inaccessible to larger Dalit masses with oral tradition. And those mud house Dalit writers who can read the social message that is couched in simple literary style and language also find it disappointing to transmit the content of the written Dalit literature to rural Dalit masses because the privileged Dalit writers who are suffering from serious intellectual stagnation are throwing at the faces of the

intellectually hungry Dalits the same repetitive stuff of course with very attractive titles like “Pradnya Surya” or “Kranti Surya”.<sup>92</sup>

“Discursive Mastery” is the third such legitimising strategy which has been used by these elite Dalit writers for maintaining their superiority, prominence and social control over the Dalit community. According to this strategy, these mainstream Dalit writers created their own literary circles for the purpose of mutual appreciation of their literary creations of whatever quality. Thus, this literary circle decides the rules of inclusion and exclusion for entry into this circle controlled by the small “Coterie”. But this small coterie is shrewd enough to open its circle by publishing some poems in their periodicals or inviting these lot to the annual literary meet. Of course, this inclusion naturally demands that these new comers to this circle are expected to write in the tone and taste that is approved by these controllers of quality in the realm of Dalit literature.

These mud house writers who are in search of literary recognition, turn to those who command “reputation” and power in Dalit literary establishment. Taking advantage of this privileged situation, this Dalit literary establishment imposes its literary canon or in other words, its own parochial standards of literature on the young aspiring literary Dalits. Thus, these new writers and artists as a result, are made to concentrate their literary and cultural energies that are subordinated to the narrow concerns of this Dalit literary establishment or the “Cultural Czars” who like the Brahminical social order try to inhibit the assertive voice of Dalit subaltern masses.

## Conclusion

In concluding remarks one can say that among the different Dalit castes with necessary cultural and musical background, it is only the Mahars who could relate their musical and cultural tradition to the ideology and politics of Ambedkar. However, this interface Ambedkar was not an historical accident but this early response among the Mahars could be possible due to their relatively less dependence on the feudal patronage and the means of

communication that brought them in cultural contact with other cultural and literary tradition of Dalit cultural artists particularly from Mumbai and Manmad.

However, the cultural response to Dalit political movement from this district basically remained subaltern particularly in terms of cultural forms and idioms that were handled by these subaltern or mud house literary figures with oral tradition. These mud house writers did use very powerful and authentic cultural forms in order to radicalise Dalit masses around the ideology and politics of Ambedkar. While these cultural and literary activists derived their intellectual input from Ambedkar they also borrowed their forms from other similar emancipatory cultural traditions.

From our study, another interesting observation comes up and that is the cultural consciousness of Dalits never remained confined within Dalit specificity, on the contrary Dalit cultural activists from this region tried to galvanise Dalits as well as non-Dalits on broader political issues like the question of united Maharashtra or the land question. Thus, Dalit cultural initiative before 1970 had the promise and potential to move away from the familiar to the universal. But such culturally vibrant Dalit movement came to be colonised by the state and dominant political forces which subordinated it to own political ends.

In the wake of this development which gobbled up the autonomous Dalit cultural movement from this region through corrupting its *kalapathak* form, the cultural initiative then came from the Dalit women from this region. These Dalit women tried to give definite lead and articulate the cultural aspiration of Dalit masses from this region. These women who were otherwise denied any cultural visibility in the cultural sphere now could acquire certain visibility. But this Dalit feminist cultural response seems to have operated under the shadow of the political, cultural and literary domination of the Dalit male. However, Dalit women did resist this domination but the resistance is weak and uneven. These Dalit women also derived their cultural idioms from Mahabharat and even Ramayan tradition but this cultural borrowing is very much resented by

the mainstream Dalit writers from the Dalit literary establishment. Its condemnation only show that these Dalit writers would like to create new cultural hierarchies within the Dalit situation. And therefore, the mud house Dalit writers have before them the double task of tackling this Dalit literary establishment on the one hand and the colonising state on the other.

## References and Notes

1. Zelliot, Eleanor, from **Untouchables to Dalit**, Delhi: Manohar, 1992, p. 317.
2. Pawar, Daya, **Kondwada** (Marathi), Pune: Magova Publication, 1974, please see the introduction of this book. P. 2.
3. This has been the common part of the literary imagination of the Dalit writers in Maharashtra. In this regard also see the issues of last few years of *Dalit Voice* published from Bangalore.
4. op, cit, Daya Pawar.
5. For more details please refer to Gokhale Turner's work, **From Concession to Confrontation** particularly its chapter (298 to 335) on Dalit literature, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1993.
6. Zilliot, Eleanor, Asian Atlas. 1973.
7. Akola Gazatteer, 1961.
8. op, cit, Daya Pawar.
9. Kisan Damodar of Ghodegaon village now in Telhara taluka of Akola District used this narrative tradition of Mahabharata in order to satisfy the cultural needs of Dalit people of the entire taluka.
10. op, cit, Zelliot, 1992, p. 320.
11. Dilip Kasabe, *Dalitanchi Vadye* (Marathi) *Samaj Probodhan Patrika*, (Marathi) Pune, 1996, p. 34.
12. In the feudal times because of the compulsions of the feudal lords the Mangs were forced and bound to play the music on the village high caste rituals.
13. op, cit, Zelliot, 1992, p. 319.
14. Dalit oral collection that was handed down to the Dalit of next generation like Haribhau Shamaskar, Haribhau Wankhade of Lohari Village in Akot district.

15. Ibid. p. 73.
16. op, cit, Zelliot, 1992, p. 320.
17. Shalini the Dalit legend is even today the part of Dalit popular consciousness of every village in this District.
18. The village Dalit from Daryapur taluka in Amravati district and of Akot taluka of Akola district still remember the role of these *shahirs*
19. Interview with Haribhau Wankhade who is 80 plus now from Lohari Khurd of Akot Taluka.
20. Ibid.
21. Kirwale, Krishna, Ambedkari Shahire, Nalanda Publication, Pune, 1992, p. 92.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, p. 93.
24. Interview with Tulsiram Dongre on 19/9/1995 at his residence at Hatrun village in Akola District.
25. op. cit, Kirwale, p. 94.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Dinbandhu Shegaonkar, *Dalit Jagruti*, Lumbini Prakashan, Akola year not mentioned, p. 2.
29. Dinbandhu Shegaonkar, *Dalit Jagruti*, Lumbini Prakashan, Akola year not mentioned, p. 2.
30. Ibid.
31. C.B. Khairmode, **Babasaheb Ambedkar Biography**, Vol. 3, p. 17. Sugawa publication, Pune, 1990.
32. Dinbandhu Shegaonkar, *Abhang*, Lumbini Prakashan, Akola.
33. Dinbandhu, **Buddha – Bhim Palana**. Tathagat Publication, 1992. p. 10
34. op, cit, Kirwale, p. 93.
35. Gopnarayn's collection of *kalapathak* scripts is with his relatives at Panchsheel Nagar, Akola.
36. Khanjiri is small musical instrument like Duf but smaller than Duf and is made out of the skin of Ghorpad a kind of reptile.
37. Oral collection of songs of Waman Wankhade of Lohari Khurd village.
38. Ibid.

39. Oral collection of songs of Tulsiram Dongre.
40. Ibid.
41. op. cit, Gopnarayan.
42. op, cit, Dinbandhu, *Abhang*.
43. op, cit, Dinbandhu, 1992
44. op, cit, Dongre.
45. An interview with Haribhau Shamaskar of Sheri Malegaon on 19/5/96.
46. This official theme found its articulation in the Dalit *Kalapathak* of Hatrun, *Dheyawadi Kalapathak*, Panchgaon, *Ambedkarwadi Kalapathak* Lohari and another *Kalapathak* of Nimbi all the villages then belonged to Akot Taluka.
47. Damodar Samrat Wankhade, a mudhouse writer from Lohari K. wrote this gender sensitive theme for the *Ambedkarwadi Kalapathak* in early 1970s.
48. Dalit women would discuss this relevance of this plot and relate the characters though male to their own life situation even after the *kalapathak* programme was over.
49. Op.cit. Zelliott, p. 320.
50. Interview with Haribhai Shamskar.
51. Oral collection of song of Dongre.
52. Ibid
53. The Dalit *kalapathaks* of 1970s would disseminate the government message.
54. Ibid.
55. Interview with Dongre.
56. Samadhan Wankhade of Lohari Khurd, said he was always invited by the *Shetkari Sangathan* to popularise the song of *Sanghatana* among the peasantry and he said he was paid Rs. 1000 for each programme.
57. Dalit artists from *Dheyawadi Kalapathak* Panchgaon and Pathardi had to migrate from these villages to elsewhere in search of employment.
58. Gaikwad, R.D. *Babasahebanchya Athwani*, Pune: Sugawa Publication, 1995, p. 20.
59. Interview with Haribhau Shamskar.

60. Waman Dada Kardak, *Ashi Ek Waman, Asmita Darsh*, Aurangabad, 1986, p. 44.
61. Ibid.
62. Oral collection of song of Dongre.
63. Dinbandhu said he was busy reading in order to offer response to Sheshrav More the Hindutava critique of Ambedkar.
64. Oral collection of songs of Gunratna Tayade of Hingna village near Akola.
65. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *Aamhihi Itihas Ghadawala*, (Marathi) Granthali Publication Bombay. 1978.
66. Interview with Kumud Pawade and also this is found in the oral tradition of common Dalit women from Akola district.
67. Kumud Pawade.
68. *Adarsh Dhamma Jay Ghosh* (Marathi) Collection of popular songs of Kisan Shamaskar, Shri Malegaon Taluka, Telhara.
69. Please refer to James Scott's **Art of Resistance and the Weapons of the Weak**.
70. Oral literary tradition of Dalit women of Mundagaon, Pathardi, Adgaon, Shirsole Bhambaro in Akot Taluka and Sheri Malegaon in Telhara Taluka.
71. Urmila Amadkar, *Asmita Darsha*, Jan, Feb, March, 1986. p. 16.
72. op, cit, Kisan Shamaskar and also the oral poetry from Dalit women from the above villages.
73. Dalit women from Khinkhed village in Akot taluka.
74. P. L. Jimkar, *Marathwadyatil Dalitanche Loksahitya*, an unpublished Ph. D. Thesis (Marathi) submitted to Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad, 1992, p. 208.
75. op, cit, Amadkar, p. 13.
76. op, cit Dinbandhu **Palana**.
77. Oral collection of *ovis* from the above villages.
78. Ibid.
79. op, cit, Jimkar, p. 116.
80. There are *Buddhist Mahila Mandals* almost in every village in Akola district.
81. Dalit women from Sheri Malgaon.

82. op, cit, *Dinbandhu*, 1994.
83. The popular songs by the mud house writers all over the District most particularly by Kisan Shamskar, Tulsiram Dongre and by *Dinbandhu* have patterned on Hindi Cinema style.
84. Interview with *Dinbandhu*.
85. op, cit, *Gaikwad*, p. 65.
86. Manohar Yeshwant, *Dalit Sahityacha Siddhanta* (Marathi), Nagpur, p. 25.
87. Ibid.
88. This refusal to recognise popular Dalit literature is always obliquely discussed by both the male and female literary figures from Dalit literary establishment in Maharashtra.
89. Dangle, Arjun, *Dalit Vidroh*, (Marathi) Mumbai, Granth Ghar Prakashan, 1991, p. 50.
90. Baburao Bagul, *Dalit Sahityache Kranti Vidnyan* (Marathi) Nagpur.
91. This has been the common belief of Dalit literary persons from Maharashtra.
92. op, cit, Dangle and Bagul.
93. In this regard, please refer to Namdeo Dhasal's very famous collection of poetry '*Golpitha*'.
94. There are umpteen number of titles with catchy titles that have been produced during the Birth Centenary year of Ambedkar. Most particularly the titles by Sharan Kumar Limbale are most prominent in this regard.



